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FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7632
INFO RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 8732
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 1829
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ MAR 0005
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 7148
RUEHQD/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 7874
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO PRIORITY 9832
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RHMFIUU/FBI WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 000852

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/16/2019
TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PHUM KJUS CO
SUBJECT: DON MARIO CONSOLIDATES POWER AS GOC INTENSIFIES
THE HUNT

REF: A. 09 BOGOTA 145
1B. 08 BOGOTA 4430

Classified By: Political Counselor John Creamer
Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) GOC officials believe that leading narcotrafficker Daniel Rendon Herrera (aka "Don Mario") has consolidated control over most narcotrafficking in Antioquia and Choco, and has ALSO made major inroads in northeast Colombia. Rendon may also be starting to expand southward to gain access to trafficking routes via the Pacific coast, Venezuela, and Brazil. Rendon, a former commander in the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), built his organization by exploiting the vacuum left by the AUC's demobilization to seize key trafficking routes in the Uraba region and tapping into the area's many demobilized paramilitary fighters. Rendon has managed to elude authorities through a combination of good security practices and corruption, but the GOC has recently increased its efforts to capture him. End summary.

CONSOLIDATING NORTH, LOOKING SOUTH

12. (C) CNP Commander General Oscar Naranjo and Medellin Government Secretary Jesus Ramirez told us Rendon has consolidated his control over narcotrafficking in most of Antioquia and Choco, despite his frequent and violent conflicts with rival traffickers. CNP commanders in the region say Rendon's group also has a significant presence in nearby southern Cordoba. Major Jorge Blanco of the CNP's Carabineros told us on March 10 that Rendon's group has also taken over southern Cesar department, and is expanding its operations into La Guajira Department, where his group reportedly has cemented an alliance with the Wayuu Counterinsurgency Front. Blanco said these moves have given Rendon nearly total domination over the most important Caribbean narcotrafficking routes to the US and Europe.

13. (C) Rendon also appears to be trying to spread his influence southwards. Center-left think-tank Nuevo Arco Iris reports that Rendon's group may be working with the Colombian Popular Revolutionary Antiterrorism Army (ERPAC) under Pedro Guerrero ("Cuchillo") in southern Meta and northern Guaviare departments, which would give it access to smuggling routes through Venezuela and Brazil. Narino Governor Antonio Navarro Wolf told us on March 12th that he believes Rendon's

group may also be moving into his department to establish Pacific trafficking routes following the weakening of the once-powerful New Generation Organization, whose top leaders have been killed or captured in recent months.

EXPANDS BY EXPLOITING VACUUMS

¶4. (C) Naranjo told us in October 2008 that he estimated Rendon's group at about 350 armed men, plus about 1200-1500 support personnel. Major Blanco places the number at roughly 1000, though that estimate does not distinguish between armed and support personnel. Blanco believes that probably hundreds of others perform individual services informally for Rendon's group. The DEA generally agrees with Naranjo's assessment, but cautions that precise estimates are difficult to establish and may be misleading, given the amorphous structure of the group. Similarly, Medellin CNP Colonel Fabian Cardenas told us it is difficult to estimate the size of Rendon's criminal group, since he "outsources" different functions to other organizations.

¶5. (C) Rendon, an Antioquia native, was a top United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) commander in southeastern Colombia before returning to his native area in ¶2004. Rendon never demobilized, instead exploiting the vacuum created by the demobilization of the AUC's Elmer Cardenas Front--headed by Rendon's brother Freddy--to seize control of strategic narcotrafficking routes in the Uraba region. From this stronghold, explained Blanco, Rendon tapped demobilized AUC fighters in the area and destroyed or absorbed several smaller criminal bands to build his private army.

6 (C) Rendon similarly expanded into Medellin (where several criminal groups are fighting for turf) after the May 2008 extradition of Diego Murillo (alias Don Berna, whose organization controlled crime in Medellin for years), and into northeastern Colombia after the demise of the drug trafficking organization (DTO) led by the Mejia Munera brothers (aka "Los Mellizos"). He also fought "Las Paisas," the rural extension of the Medellin-based Oficina de Envigado, in southern Cordoba and the Bajo Cauca region of Antioquia. This process has been marked by extreme violence, with homicide rates rising in nearly all of the areas into which the group has expanded (see Ref A). In Bajo Cauca, the murder rate rose from 21 homicides in 2008 to 43 homicides in 2009, while in the capital of Bajo Cauca, Caucasia, murders rose from 6 to 21.

GOOD SECURITY, BRIBERY KEEP DON MARIO FREE

¶7. (C) Rendon lacks formal military training or a secondary education, but has managed to elude capture through tight organizational and operational security, as well as penetration of security forces. Blanco explained that despite press comparisons to Pablo Escobar and the cartels of the 1980s and 1990s, Rendon's group is quite different and reflects the changes in the drug business since then. Those groups were hierarchical organizations that controlled every step of the production and sale of cocaine, from coca cultivation to street dealers in the United States. In contrast, Rendon's group (and most other DTOs now operating in Colombia) are merely the most visible members of an increasingly segmented business, usually transporting the finished product from drug labs in the interior to the coasts, where the Mexican DTOs that control most US distribution take possession.

¶8. (C) Blanco said this change has allowed Rendon to organize his group in dispersed, cell-like structures, which makes it more difficult to "roll up" his organization by turning arrested underlings (who frequently do not know the identity of their ultimate employer) against higher-ranking members of the group. Rendon reportedly also practices tight communications security by restricting much of his communication to handwritten notes passed by hand via couriers and by frequently changing and discarding disposable

cell phones on the rare occasions he talks on the phone.

¶9. (C) Rendon has also shown an immense ability to corrupt. Jesus Ramirez told us Rendon's consolidation in Uraba has been facilitated by widespread penetration of local authorities and security forces. Rendon followed a similar pattern in Medellin, where corruption among public forces and officials remains a serious issue. Last year, Guillermo Valencia Cossio, former head of the Prosecutor General's Office (Fiscalia) in Medellin (and brother of Interior and Justice Minister Fabio Valencia Cossi) and former Medellin Colombian National Police (CNP) Commander Marco Pedreros were forced to resign their jobs. Both now face criminal prosecution for ties to Rendon's organization. Blanco said a recent raid that nearly caught Rendon failed because corrupt security forces involved in the action tipped him off.

VIOLENCE AND INSURGENT TIES MAKE RENDON A GOC PRIORITY

¶10. (C) The GOC has long made Rendon's capture one of its top priorities. On March 9, President Uribe announced the GOC would increase the reward for the capture of Rendon (and two other major narcotraffickers) to 5 billion pesos (about USD 2 million) and would form a special government task force dedicated to catching Rendon and other ECG leaders. Last year, CNP General Naranjo announced a major effort against Rendon and formed a special search group (bloque de busqueda) in April to target the drug lord. Naranjo recently launched a police operation in Bajo Cauca targetting Don Mario's group, as well as Los Rastrojos who are reportedly making inroads from Valle.

¶11. (C) General Naranjo told us last October that he considers Rendon the most dangerous narcotrafficker in the country because he is trying to recreate the AUC. Most observers, including Major Blanco and DEA, believe Rendon is solely focused on drug trafficking and criminal activity, and

they do not believe Rendon is working to create the type of nationwide organization and national command structure the AUC had. Although a group recently appeared in the area calling itself the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (AGC), GOC officials told us the AGC is merely a propaganda front--and possible negotiating tool--for Rendon's drug trafficking activities.

¶12. (C) Still, Rendon's activities threaten GOC priorities. Rendon's collaboration with the FARC's 57th and 58th fronts to transport and export cocaine (see reftel B) has financed the insurgents and helped them survive military pressure. In addition, the fighting among Rendon's group and other DTOs is boosting homicide rates in Antioquia, Choco, Cordoba, and Medellin (among other key locations)--undercutting GOC claims to have improved citizen security.

BROWNFIELD